

American and Chinese Politeness Strategies:
"It sort of disturbs my sleep", or "Health is important"

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...in the American way of life the emphasis is placed upon the predilections of the individual, a characteristic we shall call individual-centered. This is in contrast to the emphasis the Chinese put upon the individual's place and behavior among his fellowmen, a characteristic we shall term situation-centered (Hsu 1981:12).

The study of cross-cultural differences in conversational interaction is a relatively recent development. While Hsu (1981) posits a basic contrast to explain social, political, religious, and economic differences between Americans and Chinese, he does not examine the socio-linguistic differences resulting from the individual-centered and situation-centered ways of life. Hsu is, however, very much concerned with the quality of interpersonal relationships. Such relationships are built on face-to-face interaction, of which verbal statements are a basic part (Goffman 1967). As Brown and Levinson (1978) put it, language usage is a crucial part of the expression of social relations. If this is so, we would expect the basic contrast between Americans and Chinese to be reflected in their language usage.

Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory of politeness phenomena provides a way of investigating cultural differences in conversational interaction. Their work rest on the assumption that every competent individual has face, which is his public self-image. The individual is also aware that others have face. According to Brown and Levinson, face consists of two components: positive face, the desire of every individual that his wants be desirable to at least some others, and negative face, the desire of every individual that his actions be unimpeded by others.

Many speech acts involve a threat to the face of the speaker or the hearer:

Requests, for example, are threats in that they impose on the freedom of action of the hearer. The hearer has to make a choice, either to accept or refuse. In either case, some sort of challenge to face is involved. Promises can be seen as restricting the future self-determination of the speaker, and thus threaten speaker-face. Criticisms are threatening to the hearer's face, and apologies, to the speaker's face An assertion . . . commits the speaker to an opinion which the hearer may not share (Richards 1982:66).

Brown and Levinson (1978) refer to any speech act which involves risk to face as a face-threatening act, or FTA. In conversation people will judge the cost of an act by taking into account their assumptions of the power relationship between speaker and hearer, the social distance between them, and the relative seriousness of the act in their culture. If they judge the act to be extremely threatening, they may choose not to do it at all. If it is very threatening, but not too threatening to do, they may use off record strategies, such as hints, vagueness, and rhetorical questions. On the other hand, if the act involves only minimal risk, they may perform it in a direct and clear manner (bald on record) (Brown and Levinson's terms).

Many acts fall somewhere between extreme and minimal threat, so speakers may choose strategies which are on record, but which pay attention to face. If this attention is directed to the addressee's

positive face, to his positive self-image, it is called positive politeness. If it is oriented toward the addressee's negative face, to his claims to freedom of action and freedom from imposition, it is negative politeness.

The present study uses data collected through improvisations to investigate the different politeness strategies used by Chinese and Americans. The results support Hsu's thesis concerning individual-centered Americans and situation-centered Chinese. At the same time, they argue that a crude classification of cultures as positive politeness or negative politeness cultures may be misleading. For example, in this study Americans favored negative politeness strategies, while Brown and Levinson (1978) and Scollon and Scollon (forthcoming) have characterized the United States as having a positive politeness culture.

Method

Subjects were paired and asked to improvise a situation, to be described below. While improvisation has been criticized as a way of eliciting data on natural discourse, it had certain advantages for this research. It made it possible to control the situation and, to some extent at least, determine the relationship between the two participants in the conversation (friends--low power, low social distance). With all subjects improvising the same situation, with the same general relationship between the members of each pair, the important factor would then be the strategies chosen to perform the FTA.

The subjects for the research were all graduate students at the University of Hawaii between the ages of 22 and 35. Subjects in both groups knew each other previous to the investigation. The

American group consisted of eleven individuals, four women and seven men, all Caucasians, from various parts of the U.S. There were twelve in the Chinese group, six women and six men. Eleven were from Taiwan and one was from Hong Kong. Each subject was paired with another of the same group and asked to improvise the situation. Each group made ten improvisations of the same situation, so that most of the subjects took part in two improvisations, once as the speaker (S) who had to communicate the FTA, and once as the addressee (H). The study looked at the politeness strategies used by S to communicate the FTA, which was a directive.

S was given the following instructions:

A friend of yours from out of town has been staying in your home for several weeks. The friend often comes home very late at night, disturbing you and your family. You want to make the friend aware of the fact that this is a problem.

H took the part of the friend. H's instructions were:

You have come from out of town and have been staying in your friend's home for several weeks now.

Both S and H were given the following setting:

It is now after dinner and you are sitting around talking. The Americans received their instructions written in English and the Chinese in Chinese. The Chinese subjects did their improvisations in Mandarin. The improvisations were done with S and H alone together in a room and the conversations were taperecorded. The analysis of their politeness strategies was made from transcriptions of the taped conversations. The time of the conversations varied

within both groups from a little over a minute to four and a half minutes. The average time for both groups was two and a half minutes.

Results (see Figure 1)

The American subjects, in seven out of ten conversations, relied largely on the negative politeness strategy of hedging. This strategy "derives from the want not to presume and the want not to coerce H" (Brown and Levinson 1978:150). A hedge may be "a particle, word, or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set; it says of that membership that it is partial, or true only in certain respects" (Brown and Levinson 1978:150). It may modify the force of a speech act, or it may be a question which shows that S makes minimal assumptions about H's wants. Hedges serve to soften the FTA and are used by S to avoid commitment. Examples of hedges used by the Americans include the following (. . . indicates a pause; hedges are underlined):

- (1) Do you have any idea how long you'll be staying . . . just curious
- (2) . . . any chance of your maybe keeping . . . a little bit . . . shorter hours during the week or something . . . maybe just going out on weekends
- (3) I'll give you a key and . . . maybe you try to also come in a little bit earlier
- (4) . . . sometimes you come in kinda late and make a little noise
- (5) it sort of disturbs my sleep
- (6) just regular noises

- (7) I guess maybe things like flushing the toilet and things
- (8) Um . . . just a . . . we . . . we've been kinda . . . um . . .
well . . . we go to bed kinda early around here
- (9) We were wondering if ah . . . if it would . . . if you
wouldn't mind . . . if we'd mind . . . and if you could manage
to come home a little bit earlier
- (10) It's been . . . rather noisy . . . at times
- (11) I hope I didn't hurt your feelings . . . or anything

The use of hedges was accompanied by the use of other strategies, of both negative and positive politeness, but hedging remained the main strategy. The Chinese group also made use of hedges, but these were subordinate to a main strategy. The problem of a mixture of strategies will be considered in a later section of this paper, as will the wide use of hedges across both groups.

Of the other three American conversations, two were combinations of positive and negative politeness strategies for which no dominant strategy could be identified. The remaining conversation was a case of the positive politeness strategy of seeking agreement, although this was also hedged. At the end of the conversation S virtually forced, rather than sought, agreement:

S: We got it all straightened out now so

H: Ya sure

S: We don't have to say anything more about it . . . good . . .

OK . . . time to wash the dishes now

H: Ya

This exchange sounds more like one between a parent and a child than one between friends. In fact, after this conversation H reported, "I just got told off by my old friend!"

(Figure 1 about here)

The Chinese subjects utilized positive politeness in seven out of ten cases. The other three cases were examples of an off record strategy, hinting. The strategy that occurred most often was "the classic positive-politeness action of gift-giving, not only tangible gifts . . . but human-relations wants . . . the wants to be liked, admired, cared about, understood, listened to, and so on" (Brown and Levinson 1978:134). The gift that the Chinese gave was usually concern for and interest in H, responding to H's desire to be cared about. For example (the Mandarin is given in Wade-Giles romanization, with tones omitted for convenience, followed by the English gloss):

- (12) Ni shih mang jen ou wo kei ni yaoshih pi chiao fang pien
You're a busy person oh I give you a key (then it will be)
more convenient
- (13) Wo p'a ni . . . hui lai . . . nema wan hui lai mei t'ien tsao
shang yu nema tsao ch'u ch'ü . . . p'a ni chih pu hsiao
I'm afraid you . . . come back . . . come back so late, and go
out so early everyday . . . afraid it's too much for you
- (14) tui ni pi chiao fang pien
more convenient for you
- (15) Ni chu women chia wo shih fei chang huan ying
You stay at our house I welcome you heartily
- (16) Pu yao . . . ma . . . kung tso nema hsin ku a tao san ching pan
yeh . . . ti erh t'ien tsao shang i ta tsao yao ch'u ch'ü . . .
chei yang t'ai hsin ku . . . shen t'i chung yao
Don't . . . (emphasis particle) . . . work so hard till mid-
night . . . the next day go out very early . . . this way it's
too hard on you . . . health is important

(17) Wo shih p'a shuo ni . . . hui t'ai lei .

I'm afraid say (that) you . . . will be too tired

(18) Women hen huan ying . . . hen huan ying ni lai . . . nan te yu
chi hui

We really welcome . . . really welcome you . . . it's rare to
have the opportunity

(19) Tsai chei pien chu hsi kuan pu hsi kuan?

Have you got accustomed to living here?

(20) Wan shang a k'e neng pu fang pien . . . wan i wai mien yu
shema shih ch'ing chiu fei ch'ang ma fan san ching pan yeh mei
yu jen chih tao

At night ah it might be inconvenient . . . if something were to
happen (to you) outside then it would really be a lot trouble,
in the middle of the night nobody would know

Utterances similar to these reappeared over and over, especially
the concern for H's health and convenience. It was impossible to
select an example from one of the conversations because the whole
conversation revolved around S's concern for how H's studies were
coming and expressions of concern developed over many turns. In
two of the three conversations in which hinting was the major strategy,
gift-giving (Brown and Levinson's term) was the main sub-strategy.
It is revealing to note that in the ten Chinese conversations this
gift-giving strategy was used a total of thirty seven times, while
in the ten American conversations it occurred only five times.

Mixture of strategies

Although Brown and Levinson address the problem of a mixture of
strategies in a given utterance and include a discussion of FTAs and
conversational structure, they do not address the problem of a

mixture of strategies over many turns in a conversation, a problem which was encountered in this research. Because a wide range of strategies was used in almost all of the conversations recorded, it was not easy to identify the main strategy in each one. In the analysis the main strategy was identified as either the one which led H to comprehend the FTA or the one which was used most often throughout, setting the tone of the conversation. In most cases the strategy which led H to comprehend the FTA was also the one which occurred most.

In a few cases hedges were added on to almost every strategy used. I follow Brown and Levinson in identifying the other strategy, rather than the hedges, as more basic.

When token tag questions are tacked on to a presumptuous positively polite request, for example, or when hedges (e.g. like, sort of) are used to render more vague the expression of an extreme positive-politeness opinion, the results are basically still positive-politeness strategies, even though they make use of essentially negative-positive techniques to soften the presumption (Brown and Levinson 1978:235).

The identification of the main strategy as the one which leads H to grasp the FTA is an extension of this reasoning. In several cases the strategy which S started with proved unsuccessful, so that another approach had to be tried. If this next strategy successfully got the idea across then it became the main strategy and was usually repeated several times.

In one Chinese conversation the strategy which was most often used, although not the one which got the point across to H, became

the main strategy. S began with four hints about H's coming late but H never got the point. Then S asked a clear, though hedged, question which got the point across:

S: Ni neng pu neng tsao i tien hui lai ne . . . chiu shuo . . .
a hui lai i hou tsai chia tsai nien chei yang tzu . . .
tao tao hui lai chia li

Can you come back a little earlier? . . . that's just to
say . . . ah after coming back study at home this way . . .
after coming home

H: Ou wo chema wan hui lai pu fang pien

Oh my coming home this late is inconvenient

H summarized very well what S wanted to communicate to her. S, however, immediately denied that that was what he meant:

S: Ou pu shih le . . . wo

Oh no that's not it . . . I

H: Mei t'ien tsao tien shui chiao

Go to bed a little earlier everyday

S: Tao pu shih

On the contrary

As the conversation continued S denied once more that he wanted H to come home earlier. He did his best to remain off record, even though his one question was clearly on record. His main strategy, then, was identified as off record.

S's one on record question might have been a mistake on his part. In use of the off record strategy "there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent" (Brown and Levinson 1978: 74). S denied the intent of his on record question in an attempt to

stick to his off record strategy.

Hedges and impersonalization

The wide use of hedges by subjects in both groups deserves comment. Hedging was the strategy which occurred most often in the American data, as noted earlier, and the Americans frequently tacked hedges on to other strategies as well. The Chinese subjects often hedged on other strategies, too. What is interesting is that both groups used essentially the same hedges. From Figure 2, which shows most of the hedges used by both groups, it can be seen how alike their hedges are. The major exceptions are the if expressions in Mandarin and the American wondering if. Brown and Levinson showed that hedges in Tzeltal, Tamil, and English are very similar. Mandarin hedges should now be added to their list as support for the universality of this politeness strategy.

(Figure 2 about here)

The manner in which the subjects utilized another negative politeness strategy, impersonalizing S and H, was also noteworthy. Brown and Levinson (1978:195) say that

One way of indicating that S doesn't want to impinge on H is to phrase the FTA as if the agent were other than S, or at least possibly not S or not S alone, and the addressee other than H, or only inclusive of H. This results in a variety of ways of avoiding the pronouns I and you.

None of the subjects attempted to avoid using the pronoun you, but both Chinese and American subjects tried to avoid I. The way in which they did this was to make the agent of the FTA someone other than S. In all cases the other person was a member of S's family,

which makes sense given the situation that they were improvising. It might be possible in this situation that S was only acting as a representative of his family in carrying out the FTA, so that in naming someone else as the agent S was merely being truthful. However, the agent of an FTA is by definition the person who performs it. The naming of other agents remains, then, a type of impersonalization. Instances of American impersonalizations included:

(21) Some of the other people in the family have been mentioning . . .

(22) My wife was a little bit perturbed

(23) It's the kids . . . uh . . . don't want to give them a bad impression

(24) . . . when the kids wake up and my wife wakes up

Chinese said, for example:

(25) Chia li yu jen yao tsao shui chiao

There are people in the family who must go to bed early

(26) Wo t'ai't'ai a mei t'ien t'a yao hen tsao shang pan

My wife ah she must go to work early everyday

(27) Wo papa wo mama . . . t'amen tou yao tsao shang ch'ü shang pan

My dad my mom . . . they all have to go to work in the morning

(28) Yin wei wo hsien sheng p'ing ch'ang tso shih yen ma erh

t'a nei jen kuai mao ping hen duo yu i tien sheng yin t'a

chiu shui pu chao chiao

Because my husband usually does research (emphasis particle)

and he has many strange problems; if there's only a little

noise then he can't sleep

This impersonalization of the agent of the FTA was always tacked on to the positive politeness strategy of giving reasons for the FTA, as can be seen from the examples above.

Conclusion

In the situation investigated here, Americans and Chinese showed strong preferences for certain politeness strategies. The American preference for negative politeness reflects the individual-centered characteristic discussed by Hsu (1981). Strong concern for self-determination, self-interest, and self-reliance, qualities of the individual-centered way of life, was shown in the use of politeness strategies which pay attention to the addressee's desire to be unimpeded. Similarly, the Chinese subject's preference for positive politeness is in keeping with the Chinese situation-centered way of life, with its emphasis on mutual dependence. Positive politeness strategies, by paying attention to the individual's positive self-image and showing that he is valued, stress his place among his fellowmen.

Brown and Levinson (1978:250) have suggested that "we can distinguish (with immense crudity) between positive-politeness cultures and negative-politeness cultures." The western United States is given as an example of a friendly back-slapping positive politeness culture. Scollon and Scollon (1983) argue that the American emphasis on equality of opportunity (low social distance and low power) has led to an overall positive politeness system. However, the results of this study suggest that politeness strategies are more situation-specific, so that the crude classification of cultures into politeness types may be misleading. Situations involving friends, similar to the one investigated here, are, after all, common enough. And for this situation, Americans strongly preferred negative politeness.

Americans may favor negative politeness under other circumstances

as well. In a study of service encounters between strangers in Honolulu by Hull and Keeler (1982), 69 of 100 refusals of requests and offers for action/service or for information were made using negative politeness strategies. Only 3 refusals used positive politeness (the remaining 28 were divided evenly between off record and bald on record strategies). Their samples were all collected from natural speech. Here we see another instance of a strong American preference for negative politeness. While it might be argued that Hawaii is not typical of the United States because of the ethnic composition of its population, Hull and Keeler report that ethnicity did not correlate with choice of politeness strategy.

The sample for this study was quite small. Replication with a much larger number of subjects is needed to check the reliability of the results obtained. In addition, in improvisations the subjects know that they are acting, and may tend to over-act. Improvisations thus may present an exaggerated picture of the subjects' usual behavior. Data collected through methods other than improvisation would be helpful in verifying the data from these improvisations. Further research into the same situation investigated here, but between Americans and Chinese, to see if the two groups maintain their preferred strategies, and if so, if that causes communication problems between them, would be very useful. Investigation into the strategies preferred by Chinese and Americans in other situations, with differing values on power, social distance, and the rating of the imposition, would shed light on the question of the desirability of the classification of cultures into politeness types.

Figure 2. Hedges

Chinese	American
pi chiao comparative(ly) i tien a little	a little bit a little kind of; sort of pretty + adjective
wo hsiang I think (wo) pu hsiao te pu chih tao (I) don't know	I think; I guess I don't know
chiu shih (shuo) just (to say)	just it's just that
k'e neng; huo shü maybe; perhaps	maybe; perhaps might
ssu hu (it) seems yu te shih hou sometimes	(it) seems (to) sometimes; at times occasionally
hai tse ma yang or how; or anything	or anything or something
ju kuo _____ (te hua) chia ju _____ (te hua) if _____ (if)	
	I'm wondering if I was wondering if We were wondering if

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